THE AUSTRALIAN

NATION

Sydney Theatre Company patrons demand action following pro-Palestine protest

By ALEXI DEMETRIADI

7:29pm November 28, 2023. Updated 7:40am November 29, 2023

391 Comments

Thousands of Sydney Theatre Company patrons and two of the nation's top Jewish creatives have called on the company to prevent future political stunts and consider sacking the actors who hijacked the opening night of the STC's flagship production with a pro-Palestine protest.

A petition of 1052 patrons wrote to the STC board demanding an explanation as to what happened as leading creatives lamented that "nuance" had been replaced with an overt political stunt.

High-profile Australian soprano Tania de Jong – whose parents survived the Holocaust – slammed the protest, saying that it would leave Jewish audiences behind.

Award-winning stage director Gary Abrahams called for "complexity and nuance" as opposed to stunts.

On Sunday, The Australian revealed how three cast members in Andrew Upton's adaptation of The Seagull wore traditional keffiyeh headdress during Saturday night's encore in a "stance" of support for the "occupation of the Palestinian people".

The STC later distanced itself from the stunt, apologising for "any distress caused".

De Jong, who has performed in operas across the world, went sofar as demanding that the actors be "immediately sacked".

"We live in an increasingly divided and isolated society," she wrote to the STC. "The arts should be shining a light into the darkness and build bridges.

“It should never seek to divide and create further trauma in this deeply troubled civilisation.”

De Jong wrote that the actions of the trio “disenfranchised” the Jewish and wider community, telling The Australian that theatre should “transcend” and not divide.

“You go to experience and be taken on a journey,” she said. “Not just Jewish theatregoers but everyone (who) goes to have a shared experience. If we’re going to have a healthy arts industry, we need to be careful and thoughtful about how we discuss important issues.”

Abrahams said The Seagull protest failed to understand the “full complexity” of the war. He warned fellow artists against a “pick-a-sideism” approach to the conflict, saying it was the responsibility of creatives to build a space for “complex, nuanced and detailed” political conversations.

Abrahams said it was important to remember “we make work for the audience”.

“That’s not to say we can’t talk about what’s going on, but invite them into the full complexity of the discussion ... of which I don’t think (Saturday’s onstage protest) did.”

He also lamented the “loss of the centre” and the creep of “pick-a-side-ism” and “us versus them” – which he said was “dangerous”.

“The centre is a place for nuance, somewhere that holds the complexity of what’s going on,” he said. “Not just on the (Israel-Palestine) conflict, and not just about Muslims and Jews, but about how it’s affecting society.”

Although Abrahams said he understood why some saw art as a form of activism, he said there was an important difference when artists could create a piece of work that “speaks to the issues”.

“Pulling a political stunt can be very divisive when it hasn’t been undertaken with permission from everyone involved, and is thrust on to an unsuspecting audience, which is the issue here,” he said.

“It can be a difficult time to collaborate in the middle of a war that extends past just the simplistic notion of Jews v Muslims or Israel v Palestine.

“Artists have a right to have strong views and opinions, and to feel deeply about these issues, but artistic action demands thoughtful collaboration and a duty to hold multiple perspectives.”

The Australian can also reveal that more than 1000 STC supporters, patrons and members have signed a letter to the company’s board asking for a “commitment” that such a stunt won’t happen again and calling the actions “deeply inappropriate and offensive”.

“The impact of such a partisan political action extends beyond members of the audience who may have connections to the conflict and may have been triggered or traumatised,” the letter read.

It called for a public apology, and communication as to how the incident happened and the company’s current stance.

Keren Miller, one of the letter’s organisers, said she wanted to ensure theatre remained a safe space.

“Art is meant to be a uniting force,” she told The Australian. “We would like to see an acknowledgment that people going to the theatre, whatever group they’re from, should not feel marginalised.

“We don’t want a political statement but an apology that recognises it should be a safe space.”

Another letter sent from 35-year STC supporter Danny Grynberg said he felt as if the company “didn’t care” about him or “Jews”.

“As far as this one-time subscriber and supporter is concerned, you simply don’t care about me,” he wrote.

Mr Grynberg told The Australian he and other Jews “felt abandoned by the progressive left”.

“The STC has been amazing as an institution for driving change and for the inclusion of marginalised groups,” he said.

“But there seems to be no taking into account us, except when they want to raise money.”

The STC was contacted on Tuesday for comment.

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